

Celebrating the Jubilee of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG)

On 8th December 1965, the closing day of the Vatican Council, the decree establishing the International Union of Superiors General was signed. The Union was seen as the first fruits of *Perfectae Caritatis*, a positive development full of hope. In the decades after Vatican II the Union would prove to be an important way of implementing the renewal and adaptation of religious life asked by the Council. Leaders of women's congregations met regularly, to contextualize the main aims of the UISG which included the desire to witness to the charismatic identity of religious life, to reflect on the challenges of the times searching for adequate responses and to express solidarity and communion through collaboration in various projects. The UISG bulletin, the meetings of Constellations and the Plenary Assembly held at three year intervals became important means of sharing insights and reflections on religious life from different cultural contexts and perspectives, seeking how God was calling for new responses to the needs of a changing world,.

In the intervening years the membership of the UISG has grown enormously There are now more than 1850 members, all leaders of female pontifical and diocesan congregations. Through their discerning, participative leadership, hundreds of thousands of women religious continually seek to hear the voice of God calling them forth again and again, to serve in ever new ways. As Cardinal Braz di Avis remarked in his homily during the Eucharist which opened the Jubilee celebrations on December 12th, 2015: "this is not a celebration just for the Religious Superiors but for all of consecrated life." When preparing for this period of Jubilee celebration, the Executive Board, of UISG kept the biblical understanding of Jubilee in mind and heart – that special year during which slaves and prisoners were freed, debts forgiven and the mercies of God made manifest. This raised the questions: "How then to make this practical vision a reality in our day? How to mark this Jubilee with some practical action?"

There were several important resources available to guide this reflection and discernment. The Letter from Pope Francis announcing the Year of Consecrated Life and the two further letters – *Gaudete* (Rejoice) and *Scrutate* (Keep Watch) from the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life – invited each form of consecrated life to ask what is it "that God and the people today are asking of (us)."¹ We were invited to travel "onwards in exodus along the paths of history.....coming to grips with new situations and challenges as they develop."² We were reminded of the joy of the Gospel calling us "to weave a spirituality like a type of searching, exploring alternative metaphors and new images....creating an unprecedented perspective."³ These documents offered images which fired our imagination.

Several of the images offered in these documents are linked to the OT exodus journey. They include images of journeys and caravans, crossroads and thresholds, frontiers, horizons and margins; and the tiny glimpses of fire, cloud and breeze. I would like to focus

¹ WJ, Section 2, # 5.

² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, **Keep Watch: A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women Journeying in the Footsteps of God** (Catholic Truth Society, London, 2014), #1 (KW)

³ KW, # 58.

first on how some of these images are calling us forth to new places and then to explore the new response which emerging at UISG as a sign of Jubilee.

Journey: We are reminded in the documents that since Vatican II, Consecrated Life has undertaken an exodus journey. This epic journey with its “stop and start” rhythm and its many “highs and lows” is symptomatic of the pace of our contemporary life. We are reminded that “there have been times of enthusiasm and audacity, and creative fidelity” but also many times of fragile uncertainties....and bitter disappointment.”⁴ At times our journey as consecrated men and women seems to have lost some of its vigour; we have been impatient when stops were prolonged and the final destination seemed unattainable. We are now being asked to set on that journey again, knowing that there will be bright patches and dark tunnels, but that it is God who always guides our journey.

Pope Francis is calling religious forth in clear and explicit ways. He says “leave your nests”; “go out through that door and meet the people” “go out on the streets”; “go to the frontiers” “leave the centre and travel towards the peripheries”; “reach the fringes of humanity.”⁵ Ours is to be a prophetic journey of transformation, both inward and outward. We are challenged to make the whole of our lives “a pilgrimage of transformation.”⁶ It is as if we have been sitting at table after a journey of doubts and sadness and now we are invited to recognize the Lord in the breaking of bread and go forth once again.

We religious are invited to go forward clothed in the essence of the Gospel. Knowing that every charism of Consecrated Life is rooted in the Gospel which is the place to which we must return. From there we are to journey outward courageously, guided by the Spirit, keeping watch so that we can “make choices that will honour the prophetic character of our identity.”⁷ The goal of the journey is towards unknown lands. There we will glimpse “little signs of a new story’ as we travel onwards, guided by the rhythm of the Spirit.

We are called to travel with others in “unity of heart within a fragile present in which the future is waiting to be born.”⁸ There will be “wise and patient companions for the journey”⁹ as we walk with millions of people who are on a similar journey through many different new “worlds and civilizations” which are “destabilizing age-old identities and fostering mixtures of cultures and religions.”¹⁰ Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus we welcome those we meet along the way, listen to their joys and sorrows and get to know their needs, their hopes and aspirations, their failings and disappointments. We are to be servants of communion and encounter.¹¹

The Caravan of People: In different ways the documents ask “where will the consecrated be” in this new human journey, in this mass of humanity? Will we be like “watchmen at the edge of things” where we can search for clarity about what is happening and then discern the small humble responses that we can make in different contexts? Will we be prophetic witnesses of the Gospel not safeguarding the status quo and the bottom line but demanding that resources be shared and protected? Will we take upon ourselves the desperation of the

⁴ KW, p.18.

⁵ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Rejoice: A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women,(R) # 10, KW, p. 60; Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father Francis, The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium (EG), #46

⁶ R, p.15.

⁷ KW, p. 2.

⁸ KW, 48.

⁹ KW, 47.

¹⁰ KW, 59.

¹¹ R, p.26.

people? Will we have the courage to swim against the tide of efficiency and the culture of waste? Will we have warm and tender hearts for the tired and the weak? Will we “sense the mystique of living together” in the middle of the chaos and flux and things? Will we be there to mingle and encounter, to embrace and support one another un-afraid “of stepping into the flood, which while chaotic can be a genuine experience of fraternity.”¹²

Will we be part of this caravan of solidarity and work with others to form a truly human community? Will we answer the call to be part of an outgoing Church....

.....ready to leave behind what we have and undertake a long and difficult journey like Abraham travelling into the land of Canaan or Moses moving towards a mysterious land linked to the patriarchs.”¹³

Pope Francis encourages us to continue the journey in and among the people,”..... led by the Spirit, never unyielding, never closed.....always open to the voice of God.”¹⁴

Crossroads and Thresholds: As part of this outgoing church, we religious are to be there at the crossroads ready to pitch our tents on untrodden paths and move into new landscapes. There we must bear witness to the Gospel offering help and solidarity of every kind¹⁵. The various documents name many of the crossroads of the world. We know that as religious men and women we have always been in these landscapes, at these crossroads places....but now we are being asked “to find new and courageous ways to reach all” and “to go beyond, not just beyond, but beyond and into the thick of things, where everything is at stake.”¹⁶ These are threshold places, where the Spirit groans aloud and where we no longer know what to say or what to do – often because of the enormity of the challenge - but the Spirit knows the plans of God and hands them over to us. We will find the way if we stand on thresholds and open new clearings in the jungle of human life.

New Horizons and Margins: As religious we are being called to search the horizons of our own lives and of our times in watchful prayer. We are to broaden our horizons because before us appear new realities, other cultures, different necessities, emerging peripheries.¹⁷ Searching the horizons of our times we glimpse new needs, calling for discernment and new actions. The documents point out that the margins calling us onward are “geographic, urban and existential” they are margins of the mystery of sin, pain, injustice and misery.”¹⁸ These we are told are the new hermeneutical horizons that cannot simply be listed but must be inhabited and brought firmly under the guidance of the spirit.¹⁹ We are to go there to search for signs of God so that we can make bold evangelical choices.

On the journey ahead we must keep watching for the small signs of the Holy Spirit guiding us forward. While keeping in our hearts the hopes of the world we are to “look for the unpredictable arrival of the little cloud;”²⁰ the coming of the rain, the appearance of the morning stars; the gentle breeze or “the fire that shines within the cloud.”²¹ These biblical symbols are indications that we will be led onwards by small and frail signs and that we need

¹² EG, #87.

¹³ KW, p. 46.

¹⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁵ KW, p. 23.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, Audience with Participants in the Encounter, organized by the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes, Rome (May 10th, 2014).

¹⁷ KW, p. 47.

¹⁸ Rejoice, p.28

¹⁹ KW, p. 59.

²⁰ KW, p. 45.

²¹ Ex. 40: 38.

to look out for those signs through the practice of discernment individually and in our communities and institutes. We are responsible for searching the sky together for small signs that call us to “put our meagre resources into play.”²²

The various images presented in these documents – journey, caravan of people, crossroads, thresholds, new horizons and margins – clearly call for our engagement as religious women in new and challenging places. To mark the UISG Jubilee, the Executive Board searched for a concrete action that would be a prophetic sign of who we are today as women religious across the world. The cries for freedom, for safety and security of the hundreds and thousands of migrants crossing deserts and seas, risking all for a better life for themselves and their children touched our hearts. Sr. Elisabetta Flick AP, Sr. Carmen Elisa Bando SSps and Sr. Fernanda Cristinelli CMS were asked to form a committee to see how UISG could respond to the needs of migrants and refugees. They undertook many visits to Lampedusa and Sicily to learn from diocesan personnel, lay groups and religious. Gradually the UISG Migrants Project gradually took shape.

Cardinal Montenegro asked for sisters who would be mobile, flexible, attentive listeners and good companions to those arriving on Sicilian shores, while also serving as a bridge with the local people. Two small inter-congregational communities of sisters were established in December 2015 in Sicily in Ramacca and Agrigento to mark the Jubilee of UISG. These ten sisters from 8 different congregations and many different cultures are truly a sign of Jubilee and a witness to the future of religious life on mission. They demonstrate the desire of the members of UISG to continually seek ways together to serve the Church and the World, by living and working collaboratively and inter-culturally. These sisters will not begin by establishing a particular project, instead they have been asked by the Cardinal to spend some time listening to the needs of those arriving in Sicily and to the experiences of the local people in order to see how best to respond. It is hoped to purchase two second-hand camper vans so that the sisters can travel throughout Sicily to meet those who are often afraid to make themselves known to local authorities for fear that they will be deported. Others are having great difficulty adapting to a new way of life – they have never seen roads where cars travel at speed and so are often in danger of being hit by passing vehicles. Others bear exterior and interior wounds because of the violence that they have experienced in coming to this land of promise. There are many unaccompanied minors who are at risk of being exploited. The sisters are slowly seeking ways to be a visible presence of a merciful and compassionate God.

There are many new crossroads and margins of need in our world. The presence of this new inter-congregational and inter-cultural mission in Sicily is a visible sign to all the members of UISG that each sister is being called forth “to heal wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care.” Only then will our Jubilee be truly celebrated.

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²² KW, p. 47.